

From the Consul's Desk: The U.S. Visa Process in Overview

Despite the recent economic downturn, travel between India and the U.S. remains robust, with more direct air routes opening all the time. Vibrant communities of Indian expatriates now exist in every corner of the U.S., from Silicon Valley to Atlanta, Georgia, creating an ever-increasing demand for Indian-made goods, cultural programs, business meetings and family visits. Americans of Indian descent are increasingly prominent in U.S. politics, education, medicine and popular culture, stimulating further interest in India and its traditions.

Indian students continue to play an important role in U.S. higher education, with some 94,000 currently enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. Indian students in the U.S. have earned a widespread reputation as hard-working, energetic representatives of their homeland, and many are heavily recruited for employment opportunities upon completion of their studies. Skilled IT professionals from India play an important role in many U.S. industries, from developing new products for high-tech companies to providing back-office support for financial advisors.

In 2008, the U.S. Consulate General in Chennai issued more than 225,000 non-immigrant visas of all types. While it's certainly true that work visas are an important part of our portfolio - indeed, the Consulates in Chennai and Hyderabad continue to issue almost a third of all U.S. work visas worldwide - frequently overlooked are the myriad non-work visas that we issue every day:

- The couple from Coimbatore going to visit their grandchildren in America for the first time;
- Groups of stone-carving shilpis who will help create Hindu temples;
- Troupes of traditional Carnatic musicians going to perform at a cultural festival;
- A pastry chef taking up a position on a cruise ship;
- College students participating in a youth leadership exchange with an American university.

Each of these cases represents an important opportunity for cross-cultural interactions, and has the potential for establishing further connections between our countries.

Applying for a visa to the U.S. should not be a mysterious or intimidating process, and we continually seek ways to make the process as transparent as possible. To that end, we will present over the next few days a series of informative articles intended to "de-mystify" our approach to visas for work, study and tourism. Recognizing that there are many sources of potentially disastrous advice out there, we will also briefly discuss what not to do when making your application.

To schedule a visa appointment, your first stop should be the Consulate's website: <http://chennai.usconsulate.gov>. You will find there a comprehensive guide to selecting an appointment time, paying the visa fees, completing your online visa application form and

preparing your supporting documents. Thanks to an India-wide U.S. visa initiative over the past two years, appointments are generally available within a few days.

On the date of your scheduled visa interview, you should arrive at the Consulate no more than one hour before your appointment time. You will be escorted through a security screening, and then directed to an intake window. Once we've taken an electronic scan of your fingerprints and verified your personal information, you will be interviewed by an American Consular Officer.

During your interview, be prepared to explain to the Consular Officer why you wish to visit the U.S. It is helpful to have details of your itinerary, with dates, travel destinations and planned accommodations. Bear in mind that the Consular Officer has several responsibilities to consider during the visa interview: to allow legitimate travel to the U.S., to prevent unlawful immigration, and to protect U.S. borders from travelers with bad intentions. It is your responsibility to establish your connections to India by demonstrating your employment, family and social obligations. Such connections help us to see that your intention is to stay temporarily in the U.S. and then return to India, as is required for most types of non-immigrant visas.

While you are welcome to bring documents with you to demonstrate your ties to India, understand that the officer may not request to see the documents. Please don't take it personally; the most important information will be conveyed via your interview, during which you should endeavor to answer the officer's questions honestly and completely, in your own words. Memorized or rehearsed answers are typically not helpful in determining your connection to India, and will not help you obtain a visa. In short: relax, be yourself, and remember the officer is only human.

Of course, not everyone will qualify for a visa. If your application is refused, you will receive an information sheet explaining the immigration law that applies to your case. In most cases, you are welcome to reapply in the future if your situation changes.

In order to make your interview appointment as convenient as possible, the Consulate has implemented several physical improvements in the past year. We now have more intake and interview windows, more adjudicating officers, and an on-site photographer. In addition, VFS, our appointment contractor, has a waiting lounge at their nearby office, where for a small fee you can relax as you await your appointment time.

We look forward to seeing you at the Consulate to discuss your travel needs, and hope that your trip to the Consulate will be an enjoyable precursor to your visit to the U.S.

U.S. Consulate General: <http://chennai.usconsulate.gov>